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DR. WELCH AND MEDICAL HISTORY

BY

RICHARD HARRISON SHRYOCK

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Wellcome Library

Dr. Welch accomplished so much in scientific and professional spheres that his work in medical history has naturally been viewed as tangential to his main career. One might therefore expect to find that his historical interests were of an incidental nature, but nothing could be further from the truth. All the evidence indicates that his delight in historical studies began with his college years and continued into his last days here at the Hopkins Hospital. Pushed aside for considerable periods by professional activities, this interest reasserted itself again and again; and his final appointment as professor of medical history was a more logical one than he himself—with his usual modesty—was willing to admit. It was logical not only in view of a long concern with the subject but also because Welch was an able medical historian in his own right. No American of his time displayed more insight into the development of certain modern aspects of medicine. It is extraordinary that this should have been the case with a man who, of necessity, gave the greater part of his years to non-historical activities.

Welch was first attracted to history as an undergraduate at Yale, where he aspired to become a professor of the classics. He subsequently studied in Germany under men who had some respect for historical backgrounds, but there is no record of any one teacher who inspired his enthusiasm. He attended Haeser's lectures on medical history at Breslau and found them " deadly dull " ; but this experience did not discourage him. His interest in the past seems to have been self-sustaining, and he continued to read general historical works throughout his life. Upon becoming immersed in medicine, he brought to bear upon this field the historical perspective which was already essential to his whole outlook.

After Welch came to the Hopkins in 1885, he was too busy for several years to give much heed to medical history. Dr. Billings had urged a decade before that the subject should be taught here, and did lecture on it himself for a short time. Under these circumstances, it is strange that Dr. Welch made no mention of the matter in outlining plans for the medical school in 1886. Two years later, however, he advocated in an address at Yale: " the study of the history of medicine, a subject which notwithstanding its interest and values is much neglected. Nothing," he went on, " is more liberalizing and conducive to medical culture than to follow the

evolution of medical knowledge." [1] He thus anticipated, almost at the beginning of his Hopkins career, the program to which he finally gave all his energies some thirty years thereafter.

During the next year, 1889, Osler and Kelly joined the Hopkins group, and Welch found them kindred spirits in historical as well as other matters. Osler led in founding the historical Club at the Hospital, of which Welch became the first president. At the initial meeting, the latter spoke on the value of historical studies to the physician; and thereafter he continued these talks to the Club year after year until he took over the direction of the School of Hygiene in 1918. In arousing the interest of his hearers, Welch had the advantage of his unique reputation and personality: whatever the master found of value, the students viewed with respect. It is improbable that any specialist in medical history, however able, could have elicited the same response. Rufus Cole noted that the club meetings "exerted a deep and lasting influence on all the students and assistants. They stirred into life a new side of our personalities, the cultivation of which is important, even in those whose chief interest is science. . . ." [2]

In a word, Welch breathed the spirit of the humanities into medicine—a living spirit, which animated current medical concepts and problems and which was never deadened by a mere curiosity about the past for its own sake. Although he spoke at first of cultural values, the historical approach to medicine became more than this to him—it was a means by which the scientific navigator could take his bearings from the past and so chart his course into the future. He supported all his favorite programs, such as the need for integrating medicine with other sciences, by evidence drawn from past experience.[3] In his treatment, history was related to and threw light upon the present. It had, in an ultimate sense, utilitarian as well as cultural values. This outlook placed Welch in line with the utilitarian or pragmatic attitudes, which had long characterized American society.[4] History was a serious business.

Between 1918 and 1925, Welch was absorbed in the development of the School of Hygiene. Upon reaching his seventy-fifth year on the latter date, he expressed a natural desire to retire; but his many friends had no in-

[1] Simon Flexner and James Flexner, *William Henry Welch and the Heroic Age of American Medicine* (N. Y., Viking, 1941), 421.

[2] *Ibid.*, 422 f.

[3] See his "Unity of the Medical Sciences," "Interdependence of Medicine and the Other Sciences of Nature," given in *Papers and Addresses*, III (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins Press, 1920), 305 ff. and 315 ff.

[4] "Consideration of the Introduction of Surgical Anaesthesia," *ibid.*, 229.

tention of permitting this. Seeking some further opportunity for him and knowing his long interest in the subject, several of them conspired with Abraham Flexner to secure an endowed chair for him in medical history. Just because he took this field seriously, Welch was disturbed to learn of expectations that he would now " loll about " in the proposed chair during his " loafing years." He at first declined the suggestion, on the ground that to take it " at my age would merely emphasize the spirit of dilettantism in which the subject is regarded and generally pursued in this country." The very fact that Welch recognized this danger was, of course, the best evidence that he would not succumb to it. Convinced, finally, that the post would be offered to no one else, he accepted in 1926; and the General Education Board thereupon provided the necessary funds in connection with the endowment of the Medical Library.[5]

And so, at 76, Welch embarked upon his third major professional program with youthful enthusiasm. He decided at once that the professorship must be expanded into an institute in association with the library. Knowing German institutions well, his mind naturally turned to the famed Institute of the History of Medicine at Leipzig as a model. Hence, just as he had gone to Germany for advanced medical training over fifty years before, he now returned there in 1927 for further light on his new profession.

His journals for this trip are replete with human details which make interesting reading. Here was a man of almost eighty undertaking alone an arduous journey, on which he was not only to explore the possibilities of an institute but also to select and purchase $5,000 worth of books for the Medical Library. Yet Welch took it all as a matter of course. He had his little difficulties because of absent-mindedness; as when he forgot to declare at customs his beloved cigars, and officials held up the boat train at Southampton because of their suspicions of this venerable smuggler.[6] In London he was much impressed by the Wellcome Historical Medical Museum, and its potentialities for the teaching of medical history. Arriving subsequently at Leipzig, he was much pleased by the Institute there. Dr. Sudhoff, the founder, and his successor, Dr. Sigerist, extended every hospitality; and Welch found them congenial and stimulating. In long talks with Sudhoff, he learned much about plans for a new institute at Berlin which was to pursue the history of the physical sciences as well as of medicine. He also pumped Sudhoff on the reputation of various

[5] Flexners, *Welch*, 418.
[6] Diaries, 1927 (no. 24, " A "), 27 ff.

German medical historians, and pondered the chances of persuading one or more of them to come to Baltimore.[7]

Meantime, he secured many suggestions concerning the book lists he was compiling. Sigerist had explained that he was interested in good editions and standard files rather than in first editions and rare books as such and Welch agreed entirely with this attitude. Unlike Osler, he was not essentially a bibliophile; he wanted a working library. For several months in 1927 he bought nothing, discussing desirable purchases with Arnold Klebs at Nyon as well as with many others. In the fall, however, he arranged an extension of his leave; and after a vacation in Italy, began buying in earnest. Since he kept no systematic records of purchases, he was confused by his own lists and fearful of duplications; but he enjoyed the search for all that. He never knew just how much he had spent, and soon had exceeded the sum authorized; but noted that he would gladly go into his own pocket to make up any difference.[8] This whole time-consuming task was by no means the least of his services to the later Hopkins Institute and to the Welch Library.

The possibility of an institute at Baltimore meanwhile hung in the balance. In Paris during the preceding summer, Welch had found both Flexner and Vincent encouraging about the prospects of an endowment; but further uncertainty ensued when there was a reorganization of the Rockefeller boards. Welch returned to New York in September, 1928, and in the following February made his first official address as the incumbent of the new chair. Upon his recommendation, Dr. Garrison was offered and accepted the librarianship of the Welch Library; and this best-known of American medical historians thus became potentially available for an institute staff. Welch also brought in as an assistant Dr. Stephen D'Irsay, whom he had met abroad during the preceding year. In October, 1929, the Welch Library and the Department of the History of Medicine were formally dedicated; and in May of the next year, the General Education Board extended an endowment for the Institute.

Welch had now achieved all that he had hoped for, and plunged into arrangements for organizing the Institute and developing its activities. Dr. John R. Oliver was added to the staff, and Dr. Charles Singer of London gave the first Noguchi lectures—a series endowed by Dr. Emanuel Libman of New York. Formal instruction began at the Institute during the fall of 1930, in its quarters on the upper floor of the Medical Library. Welch, Garrison, Oliver, and D'Irsay all offered courses; but few stu-

[7] *Ibid.*, p. 77 ff.

[8] *Ibid.*, No. 29, pp. 91 ff.

dents attended and Welch confessed that the faculty was " rather overdoing it." Welch realized from the start that his energies were not adequate for the difficult task of carrying the Institute beyond its actual establishment. He therefore finally and irrevocably resigned on July 1, 1931, and the directorship was offered to Dr. Harvey Cushing and subsequently to Dr. Charles Singer of London. Both of these gentlemen eventually declined. In the fall of that year, the post was vacant. Dr. Sigerist was visiting lecturer at the time, and his success was so instantaneous that he was offered the directorship and accepted this in the spring of '32.

The subsequent history of the Institute is well known. It has remained a unique institution in this country and is one of many monuments to Dr. Welch's achievements. Although he constantly gave Osler credit for arousing interest in medical history at Hopkins, Welch alone envisaged the possibilities of an institute devoted to the field. And he alone—both because of his interests and his reputation—could have established it.

Welch, despite his broad grasp on medical history, felt some diffidence upon acquiring the status of a professional. When he attended an International Congress of Medical History at Leiden in 1927, he was welcomed with enthusiasm; but observed that he " had no right to claim admission to such a gathering of Fach-historiker." On another occasion he declared that he was " throwing off temporarily my disguise as a medical historian." He viewed himself as a beginner in his 70's. Although he enjoyed the thought that " For a budding historian, I have a running start," he declared that he would now have to go " to school again."

The Flexners, in their able biography, suggest that in this respect Welch was simply adhering to his usual, realistic evaluation of his own work.[9] But modesty was also a characteristic of the man, and I really believe that here he underestimated himself. Welch was a competent medical historian long before he accepted a chair in the field. Judged objectively by published writings, his work stands out from that of most contemporary Americans in more than one respect.

In the first place, his interest was always in the broad sweep of scientific and professional trends, rather than in things curious or episodical. At the same time, he realized the significance of minor as well as of great figures; and the importance of basing general narratives on an understand-

[9] Flexners, *Welch*, 424.

ing of local developments. In a word, he was at all times the historian as distinct from the antiquarian.[10]

Moreover, the same breadth of interest which transcended antiquarian details opened to him vistas of the larger relationships of medical to general history. In this regard, Welch was quite unusual among American contemporaries, most of whom wrote medical history largely in isolation from its social and intellectual backgrounds. "I think," he declared, "there is scarcely any subject which, for the study of the history of medicine, does not possess significance; the history of medicine requires information on all the conditions of civilization of the particular period under consideration. How can one grasp its real significance without knowing the state of contemporary knowledge of all departments of science and philosophy?" [11] In his actual writings, Welch gave chief attention to the interrelationships between medicine and the physical sciences; and took less heed of the impact of social forces upon medicine. But the larger concept was clearly there, nourished no doubt by his reading in general history.

This being the case, Welch decided that—as professor of medical history—he should establish contacts with both general historians and those devoted to the history of science. So far as I remember, no other American physician interested in medical history had made any such effort up to that time. Welch attended the annual meetings of the American Historical Association at Minneapolis in 1931, and I recall his sitting at the speaker's table on one occasion with unassuming dignity. He doubtless went out to see what could be learned from these professionals.

I suspect it never occurred to him that they in turn could have learned much from *him*. For most general historians had not—and have not yet—effectively incorporated the history of science into their synthetic narratives. There is, for example, hardly a college text in American history which provides any adequate notion of the role played by science in molding our present civilization. This should be of concern to scientists as well as to historians, for the public in consequence has little understanding of what science is all about. Welch was that rare person who knew both his science *and* his history; and had he been younger he might have done much to enlighten the general historians.

This observation may seem a bit sweeping, but I make it deliberately

[10] *Cf.* George Rosen, "Levels of Integration in Medical Historiography," *J. Hist. Med. and Allied Sc.*, IV (Autumn, 1949), 460 ff.

[11] Flexners, *Welch*, 435.

after a re-examination of his published papers. For Welch had a flair for getting at the essence of an historical trend, and then explaining it in a clear and incisive manner. He wrote well, as he spoke well, and always with apparent ease. It is true that he usually omitted the critical apparatus typical of contemporary historians—citations, bibliographies, and the like—because he wrote from a well-stocked memory and with the aid of reference and other general works which were at hand. He rarely had time to dig into the original sources. In this respect he suggests the literary historians of the mid-nineteenth century, rather than the " scientific " historians of his own day.

Yet he was quite capable of operating in the most orthodox professional manner, as is illustrated by his address on the " Relation of Yale to Medicine." He found it difficult at first to see much relationship between Yale and medicine, up to 1901 when the address was given; but just because of this it seemed necessary to consult the sources in detail. The result was an informative paper which is quite stimulating at times, as in its new evaluation of Nathan Smith; and one lays it down with a changed perspective on the Yale story. This was only one of many occasions in which Welch displayed an encyclopedic knowledge of men and events in American medicine—data which he always related to meaningful trends and backgrounds. In any case, this particular essay was buttressed by such detailed notes and citations as would have warmed the heart of the most meticulous scholar.[12]

Welch stimulated his hearers with fluent summaries and interpretations, pointed usually toward their present implications. But he was also effective in analyzing issues and in raising critical questions. In a paper on " The Evolution of Modern Scientific Laboratories," for example, he proposed a whole series of queries which needed further investigation.[13] One wishes that he could have conducted an historical seminar.

That he would have been sympathetic with graduate students, yet not uncritical withal, goes without saying. His kindly interest in younger men, and the affectionate esteem in which they held him, were proverbial. If chance had thrown him more into the way of historical students, he would certainly have been as stimulating to them as he was to junior medical men. I know whereof I speak for—if you will pardon a personal reference—Welch went out of his way to encourage my own interest in medical history at a time when such moral support made all the difference

[12] " Relation of Yale to Medicine," *Papers and Addresses*, III, pp. 243 ff.
[13] *Ibid.*, 200 f.

in a beginner's aspirations. One felt, after such encouragement, as if an accolade had been bestowed—and a devout wish to be worthy of it. The man who could thus inspire younger men had the attributes of a great teacher.

What finer tribute can we render to Dr. Welch's memory, in conclusion, than to recall again the circumstances of his final contribution to medical history in this country? At an age well beyond that at which most leaders have retired, he applied to the planning of the Institute the wisdom of a half-century of scientific and professional achievement. In so doing, he raised the standards of the discipline in this country and provided it with an impetus to which it still responds. What would he not have accomplished, had he focused his interests on this field at a more youthful period—say, perhaps, when he was a mere stripling of 60?